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ABSTRACT

A research study conducted by a classroom teacher explored the question of to what extent increased parent involvement through increased parent-teacher communication will act as a motivating factor for students in a seventh-grade reading classroom and whether this will relate positively to student success in reading. Parents and children took turns reading to each other for a minimum of five minutes a night, three times per week for eight weeks. Finds an overall positive effect--students did more of their homework, and received good quiz and test scores. By these more positive actions, the level of success was raised for the class in general. Also, parents' comments on surveys were all positive. Eight appendixes contain the following: the 5/5 Home Program, Program Log, Parent Tips, Parent Survey, Student Survey, F-L Mission Statement, Class of 1999 Reading Grades, and Class of 2000 Reading Grades. (NKA)

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Increasing Parent Involvement for Student Motivation

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Increasing Parent Involvement for Student Motivation

Improve Reading Grades in Middle School

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Introduction

This semester I have begun to research the question of to what extent will increased parent involvement through increased parent-teacher communication, act as a motivating factor for students in the classroom and how will this relate positively to student success, i.e. better grades, in my 7th grade Reading class. I have hoped to establish a comfortable information-based environment that would invite increased parent involvement that will establish stronger parent interest and presence both literally and figuratively both at home and at school in order to support the students and the teachers in their efforts.

This goal is tied in to a motivational problem that seems more and more prevalent among students and is a common topic among the many teachers that I have communicated who voice a similar concern.

An article in the May, 2000, issue of the National Education Association newspaper, cites in an undocumented survey that, "Just over 90 percent of boys now play video games-an average of 10 hours a week gaming. Almost a fifth of boys say parents would be upset if they knew what video games kids were playing."

This brief article reveals what every educator suspects, that the students are not doing a lot of school work at home, and unfortunately the parents aren't involved or aware of just what their children are doing.

In a review of the text by Natalie Rathvon, The Unmotivated Child, the author attempts to discover the roots of the problems that explain an underachieving student. In Chapter 7, entitled, "The Homework Trap and How to Get Out of It", the author reports that although many parents ask

their children about homework, many children don't know what their homework was, didn't write it down or denied having homework at all.

Her suggestion was that parents try to keep their children in a higher level than they are capable of working independently in and then she suggests several strategies to be followed at home by the parents which include predictability of home environment as much as possible, increased parental availability, homework schedules, a certain amount of time to devote to homework, help in planning long term projects, checking the homework and helping to insure that the child's homework arrives back to school.

As I read these strategies, I pictured some of my unsuccessful students, and the impossibility of they or their parents attaining most of the suggested strategies for various reasons. For example, many of my students live in two different homes. Part time with two different families. One student lives in her grandmother's home with 15 other people. Another student's single mother is pregnant with her 6th child, is unmarried and still lives at home with her own mother, the child's grandmother. At times, there doesn't seem to be any type of "standard" home life at this time for our students. It is certainly a challenge for some them to survive and it is a challenge for us to assist them in obtaining some needed life skills of which reading is an important one, I believe.

My research was decided upon after much consideration, in order to possibly prevent, or perhaps reduce, the reoccurrence of last year's situation with my students in a similar classroom where a very large number of students failed Reading class for the first term. As a result, the rest of the year was an effort for many of those students to overcome this failing grade in order to pass the course for the year.

Last year, at the conclusion of first term, in November, 13 students out of one class of 25, either failed, or were near to failing their Reading course. Although these students had received progress reports at the 5 week period which are warning slips, most of these slips were returned with only the parent signature and not even a note in the comment section from the parent questioning the reason for the poor grade.

This seeming apathy is what was problematical to me and later when considering a project for the Collaborative Action Research, I became more interested in finding a clue as to why a parent would not even make any comment on their child's report of potential failure in a subject. This question continued to perplex me and became one of the motivations for the collaborative action research project that I have undertaken.

Our Grade 5 to 8, middle school, is one of the two regionalized schools in the district, the other being the high school which is on the other side of the property. We are in the process of building a third school on this same piece of land which will then become the new middle school. The present middle school will become a Grade 4-5 school absorbing more of the two individual towns' elementary 4th and 5th grades as it becomes necessary with the predicted growth. This predicted population growth is based on the extension of the rail line into the town of Lakeville two years ago and the resultant population increases that have occurred since then. The population of these two towns that support the region, Freetown and Lakeville, is primarily composed of middle-class, whites, in both of these suburban towns. Most of the parents have at least a high school education and many are college graduates. In addition, many parents of our present students were brought up themselves and educated in one of these two towns and settled back home after marriage.

Our school facility was originally built about 25 years ago with an open floor plan, and the metal petitions that we presently have were later erected to form individual classrooms when it was felt this set-up was not conducive to learning.

Most of the rooms are divided into clusters of 8 teams consisting of 5 regular education teachers and 1 special education teacher along with a number of aides. This number of teachers and aides varies each year depending upon the needs of the students. For example, this year we have one additional aide for a student with Asperger's Syndrome who requires his own full time one-on-one aide.

There have been many problems which have surfaced in the middle school in recent years which have seriously affected our efforts to educate. This includes, but by no means is the only one, of serious overcrowding problems. The number of students for which the school was built was 650 and is presently almost double, about 1100.

We also have been working diligently with the issue of correlating our total curriculum with the Massachusetts Frameworks in order to prepare our students to take the M.C.A.S. state exams in 10th grade in order for them to graduate from high school. These requirements have created enormous pressures on the students, teachers and parents. This alone, is a labor which has greatly challenged us all, parents, students, and teachers in our approach, attitude and performance.

Many other powerful economic and social issues which have faced most towns and cities in our commonwealth and nation these past few years have also deeply affected our communities and schools as well. Such issues as drug abuse, domestic abuse, unemployment, and poverty; as well

as other major societal changes, such as single parents, same sex parents, grandparents raising children, students with special needs, and other problems affect the two towns which support our region as much as the rest of the country.

We have also had several administration changes of principals in the past five years that have also had a strong effect in our school because of continuing changes in policy issues, discipline rules, and focus of agenda for our school's teachers. These changes, and especially those changes made to conform to block scheduling have had an effect on how much time we have to connect and communicate with the students and their parents.

We have also suffered as well, some immediate building safety problems concerning both health and safety of all the people in our building. These have included the emergency evacuation of our building at least 3 times including a strike by lightning last year. In addition other problems that have occurred in our school over the past 12 years that I have been employed there have included the ongoing air quality problems with the HVAC system which appears to exacerbate the poor upper respiratory conditions and problems of bronchitis and asthma and other respiratory problems of faculty and students. Although there was a diagnosis by one engineer that this school had a "sick building syndrome", and some remediation was done to improve this system, we have not yet heard that this situation has been satisfactorily totally resolved and many of the students and faculty have been adversely affected on an ongoing basis.

In attending conferences, and workshops, in other parts of the state, the other teachers and I have been informed of similar unacceptable school condition tales from other teachers in other systems as well. The problems in education today are deep-rooted and extremely serious with far-reaching effects but these problems are not easy to solve nor the answers easy to discern.

As I have attempted to introduce the background of my research to you, it became clear to me that there is not a scarcity of areas to choose from when examining education problems to research for the collaborative action projects. The dilemma was much more of which one of these concerns to focus on and investigate with the result of hopefully effecting some improvement in at least one area at this time.

The 7th and 8th grade students in our school have been ability leveled in grade according to previous teachers' testing and recommendations as well as Stamford Tests, and the previous year's reading grades. Parents also have had powerful and undisputed input in their child's placement as well. This year, over 60 students were requested by their parents to be

placed in the other team, the 7100 division team. Other teams had similar number of requests as well.

As far as I am aware, parent requests take precedence over any other criteria that were originally created to place students in a level or in a division.

The one exception would be the Special Need Students who are placed in an inclusion class with about a half of the students in that class supposedly regulated by law to be Regular Education students serving as models. In our school, the fifth and sixth grades are heterogeneously grouped and only become ability leveled as they reach the 7th and 8th grades. There are presently two classes of every grade level from 5 to 8 and these are divided in half into two divisions numbered the 100 Division and the 200 Division. I presently teach Reading to about 125 students in 5 different classes in the 7200 Division.

For some reason, there is some perception in the region's two communities that the 100 team divisions are preferable to the 200 team divisions. As the past four principals have honored requests by parents for certain teams, the scheduling situation has created some inequalities in gender numbers, behavior problems and level assignments in the 7200 level team.

For example, last year the 7th grade 7100 team had two top levels and the 7200 team had two low levels. In general, the top level students are much more self-motivated and parent-supported than the lower levels and the resultant situation last year therefore created an unequal work load for the 7200 team.

In the past, many of my students in the fourth level Reading class, did not succeed well and did not satisfactorily improve in their reading scores. I had concluded that parents either did not care very much about Reading or were not aware of what they could do to help their child succeed in Reading in 7th grade. I also began to think that if they did know what was expected of them, they might apply an effort to help their child succeed which would motivate the child to work a little harder himself knowing that his parents were aware of what was expected and how they could participate in the process.

My question, therefore, began to be, "What would happen, if I made a greater effort to involve the parents of those students in a selected class through frequent communication of what is expected in reading for their child's success and extended an invitation to become a part of their student's Reading experience?"

Many of the students in this group, may qualify later, as at-risk for the 8th grade and high school as well as drop-outs. They could use as much intervention now from their parents and teachers as possible. For example, some of these students have ranged in the past from a 3.5 grade reading average, to a few in the group who are on or past the 7th grade level. These scores are based according to the results of the Stamford Test score administered in their 6th grade near the end of the year.

More of my research questions are:

1. Will weekly communication with parents help parents to help students to complete their Reading assignments in a more complete and timely fashion?
2. Will the invitation for parents to become more involved in their students' Reading subject as well as homework completion have a positive impact on Reading grades for most students?
3. What communication and invitations did the parents best respond to, and what were questions and expectations?
4. What are the past records of these students which might have a bearing on their present performance?

Description of the Research

Last year, the 7200 Division had one high level, two average levels, and two lower level classes. This year, each team has about an equal number of higher and lower level students in their five classes and an almost equal number of students, about 125-130 each.

The students in the fourth level class that I became interested in last year for the purpose of research of parent involvement positively affecting student motivation and success, are generally the same type of students that we have this year in the fourth level, low/average ability range according to the previously name criteria excluding parent request for certain a division.

Many of these students in this fourth level, both last year and this year, seem to have done poorly in reading in past years as well. Last year when I didn't receive a strong reaction from home to the early warning note that I sent, I began to be puzzled.

A few ideas have since occurred to me as I began to decide on a research project as to why this apparent apathy might be a possibility. Some ideas occurred to me after speaking to parents during conferences. One of these possibilities for seeming parent disinterest might be because the teacher did not extend enough effort to involve the parents of these students in the process. Secondly, perhaps some of the parents were unable to help their children because the children began to feel they were too old to have parent help and resisted having homework help from their parents. Another idea was that parents might not be aware of what assignments needed to be accomplished in spite of school supplying a homework assignment book. Although the teachers daily urge the use of these homework agenda books by the students this does not always occur.

Another argument for perceived lessened parental response was that some of the parents have limited time at home each evening because of job requirements or travel, such as not arriving home from work until 5:00 P.M., 6:00 P.M. or even 7:00 P.M. in the evening.

If this were to be added to the fact that in most families, both parents now work as opposed to 20 years or so ago when many mothers stayed at home raising the family, I have now better recognized that the time spent with the entire family home together is extremely limited and valued.

Most students arrive home from being dismissed from school within 45 minutes of the 2:25 P.M. dismissal time. That would bring them home around 3:30 P.M., or 4:00 P.M. Parents may, or may not be home at that time. In at least one instance that I was made aware of during this

research, parents do not arrive home until 6:00 P.M. after picking their children from school. This one particular boy I spoke to is dropped off at 6:00 A.M. For him, that adds up to a 12- hour school day.

Perhaps because of these time restraints, and the other homework increases that occur in 7th grade, and other outside activities, parents have begun to look for ways to cut down on the time students spend on homework at home and have begun to question the necessity or the value of certain subjects.

A number of parents last year stated in their meetings with me about their student's Reading difficulties, that these parents themselves held a negative opinion about the need for the subject of reading in 7th grade, such as whether or not children actually needed to receive reading instruction at all in this grade. Ironically, this observation was from the parent of one of the failing students. Another parent stated that I should realize that " nobody liked Reading anyway". Another parent commented that most children nowadays can read by 3rd or 4th grade and when taken in 7th grade, this subject was redundant and became boring to them as well. Another parent declared that reading was not necessary as a separate subject as it was included in the more important content areas such as math and science anyway. These parent conferences are rarely boring and have offered some eye-opening views to me. As surprising as these comments were to me at the time, I understand that these parents only spoke what they felt to be true.

Although the parent comments I mentioned did not reflect the beliefs of all parents of the fourth level class last year, these comments were the beliefs of some, and I think that I have to keep them and their needs in mind as I deal with parents this year. I'm trying to remember that what I think about education and what is important for students is not always felt by all parents. As the parents are their first and best teachers, and if these students have heard these conclusions at home, I cannot expect them to be totally receptive to my convictions about the importance of good Reading skills and the importance of doing homework or reading for fun and enjoyment. These educational views are different than mine and considering them has made my teaching a bit more reflective and challenging.

However, most educators agree that a student's motivation is an important influence on his learning especially for young adolescents. Bearing my personal experiences in mind, when I planned my research project this year, I expected that there might be some reluctance from parents or students or even negative comments, but I hoped to learn what part I could play in encouraging the majority of parents to help their children succeed. I think this success would motivate the students and

might help the family recognize that a little more of their participation and valuing of reading by spending some of their time reading would encourage them to become active partners in the teaching of reading. Quite a tall order, but I tried as well as I could to incorporate these ideas during this study while continuing teaching the other 100 students who were not part of the project.

In reviewing literature on the topic of Student Motivation and Parental Involvement, I encountered many programs that were apparently geared for the lower grades or higher grades but my teaching experience is mainly in the middle school and so I finally discovered some middle school literature.

I was reminded of the differences in middle schools when reading an article by Peter Scales called, "Do Middle Schools Work? In A Word YES!", in which he maintains that middle schools are, in fact, successful in meeting the needs of adolescent students and he further believes that although students of this age avow not to want their parents around, it is important that families are involved in the education of their children.

He suggested that children be given a list of 15 books and then they were to select one of these. The book was then to be brought home and shared with an adult who was to read the same book.

In reviewing this and other various sources for ideas to try something a little different with my Reading students that would include their parents in order to motivate them all and to increase student success, I devised a program that I compiled from various suggestions and reading plans that I had read about in the past and I called it The 5 and 5 Program. (Appendix A). It was very simply, a parent reading aloud to the child for 5 minutes, and then the child reading aloud to the parent each night for 3 nights a week for eight weeks. Each Monday I distributed logs (Appendix B) for days of the week to be filled in with date and time and signed by the parents/guardians, for each of the 3 nights they read together. I included a comment section on the bottom. On the eight following Thursdays and Fridays, I collected these logs and made a check for the week in my grade book. I then wrote a brief note on a Parent Tip from the Lee Canter workbook (Appendix C and gave this copy for the student as a receipt of the returned weekly log. I put positive stickers on the logs some weeks and I understood that some of these were placed on the refrigerator at home. After the eight weeks were completed, the 19 students who completed the 8 weeks, were given an extra credit of two test grades. I debated whether or not this would be over-inflating the grade too much, but all that effort on the student's part for only one test grade would not have attracted my students to the plan and its completion.

Out of the total of 27 students in the class, 19 participated right to the end of the 8 weeks and received the extra credit, 5 refused from the beginning to take the program application, and when it was given to them anyway, they did not ever return the parent agreement sheet. I attempted for a couple more weeks to give them copies with the proposition that they could earn one extra test grade, but they were not interested. Of the three remaining others, they began the program for one or two weeks but did not continue.

Of the five who never returned the original offer, I did not call all their parents. After I called the first parent and she did not follow up on that call, I did not attempt to further call any of the other parents. I was not encouraged by that first call, and unfortunately, we have so little time in our schedule that if something doesn't seem to be working, we eliminate it and get on with something else. However, when I offer this program the next time though, I will call all the parents of those students who do not return the extra credit offer from the beginning and those who drop out after a couple of weeks.

Overall, I felt this program part of the research was quite successful. The follow-up parent survey (Appendix D) that I sent home somewhat corroborated this feeling. Several parents mentioned the enjoyment of the time spent sharing books with their children and the first term grades of the class were overall about 20 points higher than last year's class at the end of first term. There was only one F, the boy whose parent I called but who did not follow-up.

Analysis of the Data

The 5 and 5 Reading Program that I employed at the beginning of the year has resulted in the participation of about approximately 70% of the fourth level reading class students and their parents. The exact figure was 19 out the 27 students in that class. These were 16 boys in the class and 11were girls. Three boys and two girls did not participate in the program. Two other girls and another boy began the program initially but stopped after 1 or 2 weeks. When the program was completed after 8 weeks, 11 of the boys and 8 of the girls had completed all the requirements for the extra credit of two test grades. As a result, all of these participating students and 7 of the other 8 who did not participate all passed their first term class with varying degrees of success. Except for the single F grade, a boy whose parents were called and never followed through, the lowest grade in the class was a C-. This was another boy who happened to be student who did not participate in the home reading program. There was an overall positive effect on the students doing their weekly reading with parents at home. In fact, they did more of their homework, got very good quiz and test grades, and by these more positive actions, raised the level of success for the class in general as they were very interested in maintaining their regular grades as they were expecting to do well because of the extra credit.

At the end of the term, the results were very satisfying. The class mean average at the end of the 1st term was 83.9%, as compared to last year's comparable fourth level class of 25 students who averaged a mean average of 63.8% at the same time of year with the same teacher and textbooks.

It is understood that there are a great number of other variables that impact data and results when two different groups from two different years are simply compared by 1st term grade averages as these were but for my own purposes I am quite encouraged by the results and the parent and student responses that I have received.

At this time I believe that I have seen more evidence for my premise that more parent cooperation helps student motivation and success than I've seen in the other classes, in past years, and that increasing parent involvement will increase student motivation and success in school. Parent cooperation in students school work positively impacts students and motivates them to be more interested in their grades and trying to keep themselves in control of positively affecting their own grades.

Similar conclusions to these were made in the review of various reading programs written about in an article written in 1998, by Barbara Wasik, who reviewed several reading programs across the country which proposed volunteer reading. She reviewed a United States Dept. of Education

proposal from 1997 that was an effort to improve children's reading performance. The emphasis of that program was to support schools and families in teaching children to read.

The plans included volunteer tutoring programs as well as training parents in programs promoting early literacy. I include that reference here to point out the focus of the many reading programs studied in the past with similar results keep returning with similar conclusions that there is the need for early intervention for reading success, and secondly that continued interest and support from the home is where the impetus for achieving reading success begins.

There were many positive notes written on the weekly reading charts that I sent home to document the 5 and 5 Reading Program. Many of these were returned with positive comments such as the following: "Angie and I are reading a great book on the Titanic!," " "Great Idea!" and "We are reading the first Harry Potter book." Another comment that I especially enjoyed and was the one that included the family in the reading time, "We enjoy this reading time together as a family. It's great to see older grades working with a reading program with their family."

I did not specify what book they were to read, but I asked that parents and child choose a book together that they would enjoy and later inform me about the title of this book. Sometimes the mother would read with the student, sometimes the father would. Occasionally they alternated. When one set of parents were out of town one week, a grandmother read and wrote a comment that she enjoyed any time that she could spend reading with her granddaughter.

While many parents wrote positive comments on the weekly charts, some did not write anything, so at the end of the 8-week program, I sent home separate parent and student surveys to fill out and return. As there is often a problem of important school papers not arriving home or being returned, I rewarded the return of completed parent survey with a small token, a pen. It is a big responsibility for students to bring home and return the many, many papers that they receive in school every day. Some are more reliable than this that others.

Of the 19 parent surveys distributed, 15 have been returned displaying a variety of similar positive responses about this reading program and the literature that was sent home. So far, every one of the responses to the question about the general feeling or reaction to this program has been extremely positive. Some of the responses were: "It was fun", "I enjoyed reading with my son," "I think it's a good thing. It lets the parent and child do things together." These were very encouraging responses for me to hear.

The student surveys (Appendix E) have come back more slowly, only 9 have been returned. Of the ones returned however, the same question was asked of them, "What was the general reaction to reading with your parents?" The responses were almost the same. The students best enjoyed reading with their parents. Some didn't care to read out loud, and one thought 8 weeks was a long time. Two thought that they were now reading better. The surveys are not all in, but the ones received are very encouraging.

There was also an extra credit opportunity offered last year to the students in the fourth level in the first term of the year. Their assignment was to choose any book on a 10 page book list and upon completing the reading of one of these books, they were to complete a 10 question test on a computer, which is part of the Accelerated Reading Program. There was no other type of book report required of them and upon achieving at least 80% score on the computer-generated test, they would get an extra test grade. Not one student last year attempted to complete a book for the extra credit test grade (Appendix G and H). However, no information was sent home separately to inform the parents of this extra credit offer.

Every year, we teachers know that all classes will probably be different and to try to make a valid and reliable comparison of almost any kind point by point of one class or another, from one year to another is specious.

However, this year, so far the fourth level class has been successful and more parents are calling to check on their children and writing notes about question on homework, etc. Perhaps the activity offered this year appealed to parents and students because it was a novelty to read with a parent at this age for most students are expected to know how to read well and are not often checked out on this skill at home.

Perhaps getting 15 or so minutes of undivided attention from the parents made this positive difference. I heard a recent television commercial promoting reading that when teenagers were asked what it was they most wanted from their parents the response from most of them was that the young people wanted their parents to spend more time with them.

Maybe after all, it was the extra test grades, but I believe that the fact that the parents took part, and were asked to return a signed log every week as part of the contract with their child's teacher to get two extra test grades made the difference. This partially answered my first question of whether or not increased parent communication would help students complete their reading assignments on time, and in a more complete and timely fashion.

Fifteen of the 19 students who participated in the reading at home program, achieved an 80% or better for the first term.

Perhaps there was a possible element of dishonesty of some parent's signing after not having read with their children. That I will never know, and I prefer to think that all who signed, read with their children.

One of the lessons that I re-learned last year was that most of the students in 7th grade who are failing will not necessarily know what steps to improve their failing situation or perhaps even be interested in finding out.

This year I had the foreknowledge, the opportunity, and the desire, to impact positively this fourth level class before they had failed even one term. Looking back on the grades of last year's class I remembered that I had 25 students in that fourth level class and at the end of the first term there were 10 F's and 3 D'S in that class. Of the other students in the class, eight students had C's and 3 students had B's, with one student leaving with an incomplete in the middle of the term.

Although I ask my students not to say, "Mrs. West gave me an F." I do feel responsible when a student fails or does poorly. I usually try to come up with alternative remedial solution for these students with varying degrees of success.

We were just given the task on the last ½ day curriculum in our school last month to create more interventions for students who are failing and I'm not sure about other teachers, but when a student fails I do feel as though there must have been one more thing that I might have done or maybe overlooked that might have helped him pass.

After reviewing several other readings on family involvement and the need for community support as important and necessary factors in the successful education of students, I felt that this year I wanted to at least attempt a different way to make more of an effort to involve parents whenever possible through frequent communication and invitation.

It was my hope to have the parents become a more active part as much as possible, of what their children were learning in school, how they were doing and what kinds of help would be expected of them and effort from their children in order to do well in Reading class.

Most parents want their children to succeed in school as they have experienced that without a good education people have a more difficult time in life to succeed.

Last week, we had three parents come in to speak to the students in our Reading class about the jobs that they are doing in the community. I still have a short list of other parents who have volunteered to come in and help in some way in the classroom. These responses were given at the beginning of the year on the welcome back to school letters where this invitation was attached to the bottom of the form letter. Hopefully, this parent/community interest will be informative and helpful to parents and students and teachers in remembering that to quote Hillary R. Clinton who quoted an African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child."

I had also questioned whether or not the additional parent interest and involvement in reading homework would have a positive impact on my students' grades and homework in the fourth level reading class. I believe that I now have that answer. It is, yes.

Another question that I had was to which communications and invitations would parents best respond and what might be their questions and problems be if did they did not respond on time or completely. To complete my research, I also wanted to inform myself of the information in the past records of these students which might have an effect on their present performance.

These past records are somewhat useful when developing individualized lesson plans and also help the focus remain on understanding the strengths and weaknesses of each student and problem areas than need to be addressed for their benefit.

In 1998, in the Reading Teacher magazine, Barbara A. Wasik wrote an article which reviewed several reading programs that were proposed utilizing volunteer reading.

Ms. Wasik reviewed a United States Department of Education proposal from 1997 that was an effort to improve children's reading performance. The emphasis of that program was to support schools and families in teaching children to read. The plan included a volunteer tutoring program as well as training parents with programs promoting early literacy. How to implement those ideas was not quite made clear. However, the focus of the studies was correct, to me as I believe, a great part of the impetus for achieving success in school begins at home.

An Action Plan

This year, I began from the first day of school with a determination and a plan to involve the parents in the reading program from the very beginning of the school year. I planned to send letters home the first week of school which included my school phone numbers, address, the school e-mail address, as this was information that I thought they might need at their fingertips. I included a welcoming of the parents and the students to the new school year, and inviting their active participation. There was included a tear-out section on the bottom of the sheet that was to be returned to me so that I could in this way keep track of whether or not the papers got home.

One line was added to the bottom of this letter which invited an opportunity for parents to help by sharing whatever time or talent they could offer. Some of the offers were help with homework, guest reader, classroom helper, and field trip chaperone. These were all filed and I have already asked some of the parents for assistance. Two parents have come in and talked to the classes about their jobs.

A separate homework policy letter was also sent home in September describing approximately how much and when the Reading homework would be issued.

This homework letter explained my personal convictions about homework and its value, including the consequences if the homework was not done. This consequence was a zero that day, but ½ credit if the work was handed in later. Also included in the letter was information about when quizzes and tests might be given and the consequences of not doing homework on time and the cumulative negative effect this has upon quizzes and tests.

The expectations for myself and the parents were stated as well. We had just accepted and published our school mission statements and so we were able to mail these expectations to our parents at the beginning of the school year.

During the past two years as part of the New England A., S. and C., a school evaluation process which was completed in September, the Philosophy Committee, of which I was a member, had developed a mission statement that included 3 lists of expectations, one for the parents, the teachers, and the students (Appendix F). These are positive and realistic expectations that are stated very plainly for all parties in the educational process. Teachers, students, and parents were approved by all three school committees. Copies of these expectations were sent home in order to establish the understanding by all that the education process does not

rest solely on the shoulders of the educators, but equally upon the parents and students as well.

I hoped that the parents and children have talked over a bit their plans for the new school year and spoken together about my own policy statements that were sent home as well as second letter that was sent home in which I described the classroom discipline plan which I hoped to follow this year. I have posted all of these letters permanently in the classroom as well as well as the mission statement.

I have developed some of these ideas over the past few years but had not followed through to the extent of collecting the parent signatures for each of the letters, collecting all the letters from each student checking them off on a form and filing them for future use if necessary. I had the feeling that once the letters were given to the students, it was up to them to get them home and up to the parents to read them.

This year I also added a new extra credit opportunity idea that I had never used before. This plan is one which I had created from several similar ideas obtained from colleagues and workshops. I modified these ideas to have this plan fit more easily and naturally into my curriculum and program at the middle school.

The basic idea of this plan is to have the child read at home to the parent while the parent listens and then the parent is to read to the child while he listens. This period of time can be adapted to any teacher's need, from a minimum of 5 minutes each to a maximum of about 15 minutes each daily. So as not to make it too long and discourage some students from participating I decided to make it an assignment of 10 minutes. That is, for 5 minutes from each partner, 5 minutes reading by the child and 5 minutes reading by the parent. I called it "The 5 and 5 Program". (Appendix A)

By the completion of this program several weeks ago, I was satisfied that it worked successfully to involve the parents and students in their reading homework even more than I had anticipated.

My proposal was that this activity was to occur if possible, for the first three days of the week, Monday through Wednesday, but if this was not possible, any 3 other nights were allowed. Another requirement was that the parent had to sign the log which I created, three times, for each night read. Then the child was to bring it back to school to me to be checked in for credit.

The proposal continued that after 8 weeks, the students who successfully read with either of his/her parents or guardian for this period of time

would receive 2 extra credit test grades which would be added to the 1st term report card grade. I had to make it somewhat worthwhile and one test grade just didn't seem to do it.

If all 27 students completed this program the way they were directed, it practically insured everyone to at least pass the term easily, if not get a grade of A. The students appeared to be very receptive to the idea and the parents who participated appeared to be agreeable as well.

Several parents wrote positive comments every week about the program right on the log. Some did not, so at the end of the 8-week period, I sent home a parent survey questioning among other items, certain reading questions, asking what they thought were the positive or negative aspects of the reading experience. Upon the return of the parent surveys I rewarded the students returning the surveys with a pen as a small token for assuming their responsibility of both bringing home and then returning the surveys in a timely fashion.

Of the 27 students who started the program, 19 actually completed the " 5 and 5 Program", for the 8 weeks required which was an assignment of 10 minutes for 3 nights a week. Of the other eight remaining students who didn't participate, 4 never began at all, leaving their papers on the floor under their desks or throwing them in the recycling box. Four students did return the parent signature form, began reading and returning the logs for 1 or 2 weeks, but never continued having tired of reading with their parents and having the log signed every night. Having 19 students continue the program, I though that to be a good return and did not pursue questioning the other students who did not participate or who began but dropped out. The next time I begin this program, I will further question those who refuse or drop out.

When the 19 students returned their signed logs, I gave them each a handout that I initialed acknowledging the receipt of that week's log. Some weeks I wrote a short note and on a couple of weeks, even added reward stickers on the top. One student told me that his mother had put this log on the refrigerator door.

During this period, I met or spoke with all but 5 of the parents. Some of the meetings were requests made by other members of my team for academic reasons in their subject areas, some were parent requests to become acquainted with team members and some were behavioral issues, or counseling issues. Some of the parents came to Open House Night in November. During this time I also made several calls to parents with concerns about homework or behavior. These contacts were in addition to the progress reports which I sent out to all of my 125 students as we passed the half a term mark during this experiment. Our school policy is to

send home progress reports or as some schools call them Warning Slips every 5 weeks. We send out progress reports at our school at the 5-week point, ½ way between report cards. Some of us send them out to all the students and some send reports only to those students that are failing or in danger of failing. I always send reports to all students to let them see the state of their grade in order for them to keep working diligently or to work harder if necessary.

In summary, I think that this small examination that I have attempted this past few months relevant to parental support and the positive results of educational participation with their children was successful. In order to increase student motivation and success, it was revealed that we occasionally make negative assumptions about certain of our students, especially the failing ones, and we may even include their parents in this condemnation as uninterested parents, based on our own preconceived assumptions that may or may not be valid or based on fact. The majority of teachers work very hard, and we do not like to believe that we have not done everything that could have been done to help these students, as that may too painful for caring teachers to accept. So then we sometimes believe that these students cannot or will not help themselves in regards to their failing grades and it's not our fault.

It appears that reality as we see it, is different for everyone. Often what appears to be disinterest or limitation often is the result of extenuating circumstances over which few of us would have any control given the same experiences. We need to offer parents various opportunities to participate in their children's education. Also we need to be extremely tolerant when dealing with people who may have different beliefs and traditions and needs. Everything is not always the way it seems and very little remains the same as it was, and we, as educators need to remember that it is healthy and O.K. for us to slow down a bit sometimes and re- examine what we have been accepting as the right and only way to do something. Sometimes change is needed and different viewpoints are valuable tools in coming up with solutions to difficulties we encounter in educating our students, and raising our children.

Collaborating with colleagues can be an empowering action that energizes us into looking at an old problem with new eyes, and a group brainstorming suggestions for solutions can restore our zest for helping and teaching students which is why we got into this profession in the first place. Involving parents in their children's education no matter what grade is a valuable and necessary action for teachers.

Who would have guessed that young teen-agers still really like to spend some time with their parents as the most important thing they enjoy?

Recently, it was suggested in one of my textbooks, that a project be completed, a seasonal cook book, that I saw could have possibilities to expanded into an interdisciplinary projects with my team. In the past, our team has not experienced the interdisciplinary units that we developed. Four years ago we spent some time planning an Earth Day project, but that never came to be a reality. The teacher who pulled the whole project together for the school took a sabbatical. Two years we created a Greek agora unit. Each of the disciplines drew up appropriate materials and activities for our "marketplace". As the curriculum for the 7th grade social studies class was changed and Greece will now be taught in another grade, all our work on another unit was apparently wasted.

The reason I mention these "failures" is that after these expenditures of time and effort, many of our ideas never come to pass and the frustrating feeling becomes cynicism.

These are the kinds of things that happen in many schools that I have heard of and yet most teachers do try again when some good ideas is placed in from of them that might help their students.

The good news is that many teachers will continue to come up with either their own new ideas or will try someone's ideas and try to bring the good changes to their classrooms.

Recently, I went ahead and had the students get recipes from home for two weeks, for the purpose of putting together a seasonal cookbook, an idea that was suggested in one of our textbooks. We have put together a 40 page seasonal cookbook that my colleagues were examining today with interest and they proposed that we might try putting something like this together as a team in the Spring.

It occurred to me that if I hadn't been taking this course and thinking along the lines of collaborating, I probably wouldn't have shared the idea with my team, suggested that we produce one together or offer to put the extra time in on it.

Many opportunities such as this idea seems to have come together as I got into the collaborative action mode this year. The idea of leaving myself in isolation with new ways of doing things suddenly didn't seem like the best way to move forward. I'm not sure what prevented me from doing this before, but the process of talking about my study to my team often seemed to encourage me to take a chance and suggest something new for the team and our division's students.

Conclusion

If our school hadn't been working on developing our philosophy and mission statement for the past two years, and if I hadn't been a member on these committees and if we hadn't developed the expectations lists the way that we did in order to renew our accreditation, it might not have seemed as evident to me that the parents always have the major role in the education of their children in the schools. This collaborative, self-evaluation work and the results which included publication of the lists of expectations for the parents, students, and teachers would not have been so obvious to me. By that I mean that before examining this topic, I had become more isolated in my mistaken efforts and retreated into the view that I was primarily responsible for the success or failure of all of my students. Upon closer examination of this educational experience of examination of the school's philosophy, and the many discussions that I have had with my colleagues, some who were just beginning their teaching careers, some who have been in the school for over 20 years, and myself, somewhere in between, I rediscovered as it were, the reality that although teachers are a great part of the educational process they are by no means, the only part.

Which of us alone could have thought up these three great lists of expectations that we now have in place in our communities' schools as a result of a self-study group of teachers examining themselves and their colleagues and their expectations and discovering that some of these expectations belonged to the students and some to the parents. It was an enlightening, and somewhat liberating experience that we are expected to educate our students, support them in any way that we can, but once they return to their homes, the rest of the educational process continues and some of these educational expectations are the responsibility of others. This experience of the accreditation process and the experience of the collaborative action research course both underlined the value of the value of teachers working together and separately to delve more deeply into common interests and issues in order to progress towards viable solutions with which we and our students and their parents can profit.

Recently I have been involved in collaborative action research which is the research and sharing with colleagues the results of a study of a concern that either you or a group of teachers have been interested in resolving. For example, many of my reading students have had seemingly little or no interest in completing their reading homework. This has resulted in many of them having failing grades in this subject. Warning slips sent home have come back signed but with no comments or resolutions of better effort on the part of their child. This has caused me some concern as I think that parents are a great influence on whether or not a student remains motivated in school. Not surprisingly, many other educators face the same

dilemma. We are attempting to develop some ideas, new and old ones, to motivate these students with the increased help of their parents.

After reading the Recommended Reading and Bibliography section in the Study Guide, I find that my own philosophy, beliefs, and values, relating to the question that I posed aligns most comfortably with that of Dr. Sagor's idea of the pilot program. My premise was that the interest and motivation of the middle-school student was still in a great part dependent upon the interest and participation of their parent. I initiated a program including parent reading and listening for several days a week to their child reading and found that the parents were happy to be able to participate in the improvement of their child's grade in reading, and that the child was still willing for the most part to work with their parent in improving their understanding of the work. At the same time they added extra credit to their grade.

Other younger family members also took part at times and at the very least, observed the older child working with the parent successfully and perhaps began a regular schedule of parent and child/children working together for the progress of the child. A new avenue or approach for parent and child to spend "quality time" may have been developed.

This habit of one family member reading and then listening while another family member reads then listens might extend into other areas of positive and regular parent and child communication.

G R Austin Middle School
112 Howland Road
Lakeville, MA 02347

APPENDIX A: THE 5/5 HOME PROGRAM

RE: 5 + 5 Minute Read and Listen Opportunity

Dear Parents of _____

In an effort to help your child improve his/her reading skills this year, I am requesting an additional homework assignment for the next eight weeks both for you as well as your child.

Do you think you could listen to your child read his reading selection of the week for five minutes and then either read for five minutes to him/her, or ask him questions about what he read? If you could do this for eight weeks until the end of October, I would give your child *extra credit* for this effort.

It has become a strong personal belief that the most important teacher of your child in any subject is you and your attention and comments on that subject.

If you think it's important enough to give ten minutes of your valuable time to the subject of reading for three nights a week, for eight weeks, I believe that your child will also value what you value. Moreover, I believe that it will help your child improve his grade in Reading as well as all his subjects.

Your child will be given a score sheet for you to initial each week for eight weeks. Just read for five minutes and then listen for five minutes then initial the sheet. Your example is the best teacher. Have your child hand in the sheet each week for eight weeks and I will count them as two Test grades.

I appreciate your cooperation and be assured in my interest in the highest success in reading, a most important subject, for your child.

Sincerely,

Mrs. J. West
7200 Reading Teacher

I will participate in the extra credit **5 + 5 Read And Listen Opportunity** with my child.

Name_____Date_____

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READ AND LISTEN OPPORTUNITY WK. # ____

PARENT NAME:

STUDENT:

WEEK ENDING:

MONDAY:_____
(SIGNED)

TUESDAY:_____
(SIGNED)

WEDNESDAY;_____
(SIGNED)

COMMENTS_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Grades 7-12

Homework Tips for Parents

Tip #1

Set Up a Study Area

To do homework successfully, your child must have a place in which to work. The study area must be well-lit, quiet, and have all necessary supplies.

Have your child choose a location at home in which homework will be done. Even if your child does most homework at another location after school, there still should be a place in the home in which he or she can study.

Remember that your child does not need a lot of space to do homework. The kitchen table or a corner of the living room is fine, as long as it is quiet during homework time. Whenever possible, keep the study area off limits to brothers and sisters during homework time

PRAISE

your child when he or she does homework in the study area.

Parents On Your Side © Lee Canter & Associates

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APPENDIX D: PARENT SURVEY

PARENT SURVEY - 5/5 READING PROGRAM

Name _____ Date _____

Student Name _____

Please answer the following questions regarding your participation in the Parent/Student Reading Program:

1. What are your general feelings/reactions/comments to reading with your child for the past 8 weeks?

_____
_____

2. In what areas do you feel that your child has strengths or weaknesses?

_____
_____

3. Do you have any ideas as to when or why these strengths or weaknesses developed?

_____
_____

4. What do you think are the most important reading skills your child needs to develop at this time?

_____
_____

5. Homework consistency and quality homework greatly improve the success of our students' in school. Do you have any suggestions as to how we can insure the daily use of the homework agendas by the students? How about a daily stamp in the agenda book?

_____
_____

Thanks again for your help and cooperation.

Mrs. J. West
7200 Reading Teacher

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STUDENT INTERVIEWS

NAME _____ DATE _____

1. What was the best part of reading with your parent these past 8 weeks? The worst part?

2. Would you like to have another type of project to work with your parent again?

3. Do you think it helps you to get better grades in school when parents are involved more closely?

4. How much, and in what way, do you think parents should get involved with you and your homework and your work at school? Mother or father?

5. Were your parents more or less involved with you and your school last year? The year before? Ever?

Comments: _____

"The mission of the George R. Austin Middle is to provide excellence in education through a nurturing environment where students can develop the knowledge, skills, and values for continuous learning."

George R. Austin Middle School Philosophy

We affirm that learning is a continuous process of growth. We value each person's uniqueness. We accept the incredible diversity of physical, intellectual, social and emotional growth that is characteristic of a middle school student. Because parents and guardians are the first and most influential teachers in a student's life, we appreciate and support their role in the process of student development and learning.

We will encourage students to become independent life-long learners by acquiring the knowledge and the skills necessary for personal success. We will emphasize experiences that foster self-respect, respect for others, self-reliance, and responsibility. We will provide a challenging, supportive, and healthy environment that is conducive to ***exploration, creativity, and tolerance.***

Our challenge is to insure the best opportunity for intellectual growth and social development for each student.

We support our mission and philosophy through the following strategies:

a) open communication among all partners in the educational process
b) cooperative spirit between home and school in the understanding and appreciation of learning
c) active student involvement in the learning process; inherent in this process is learning to cope with failure as well as success
d) student-centered environment that nurtures creativity, self-worth, tolerance, academic achievement, and excellence
e) varied and innovative teaching techniques to accommodate learning styles
f) recognition of student accomplishments
g) demonstrated achievement through a variety of assessment methods

We expect all students to:

a) come to school regularly and on time
b) obey all the school rules
c) be prepared with proper materials needed to learn
d) complete all assigned work
e) seek individual help when it is needed
f) meet a minimum academic standard of 70% in all subjects
g) respect all members of the school community
h) take pride in the facility

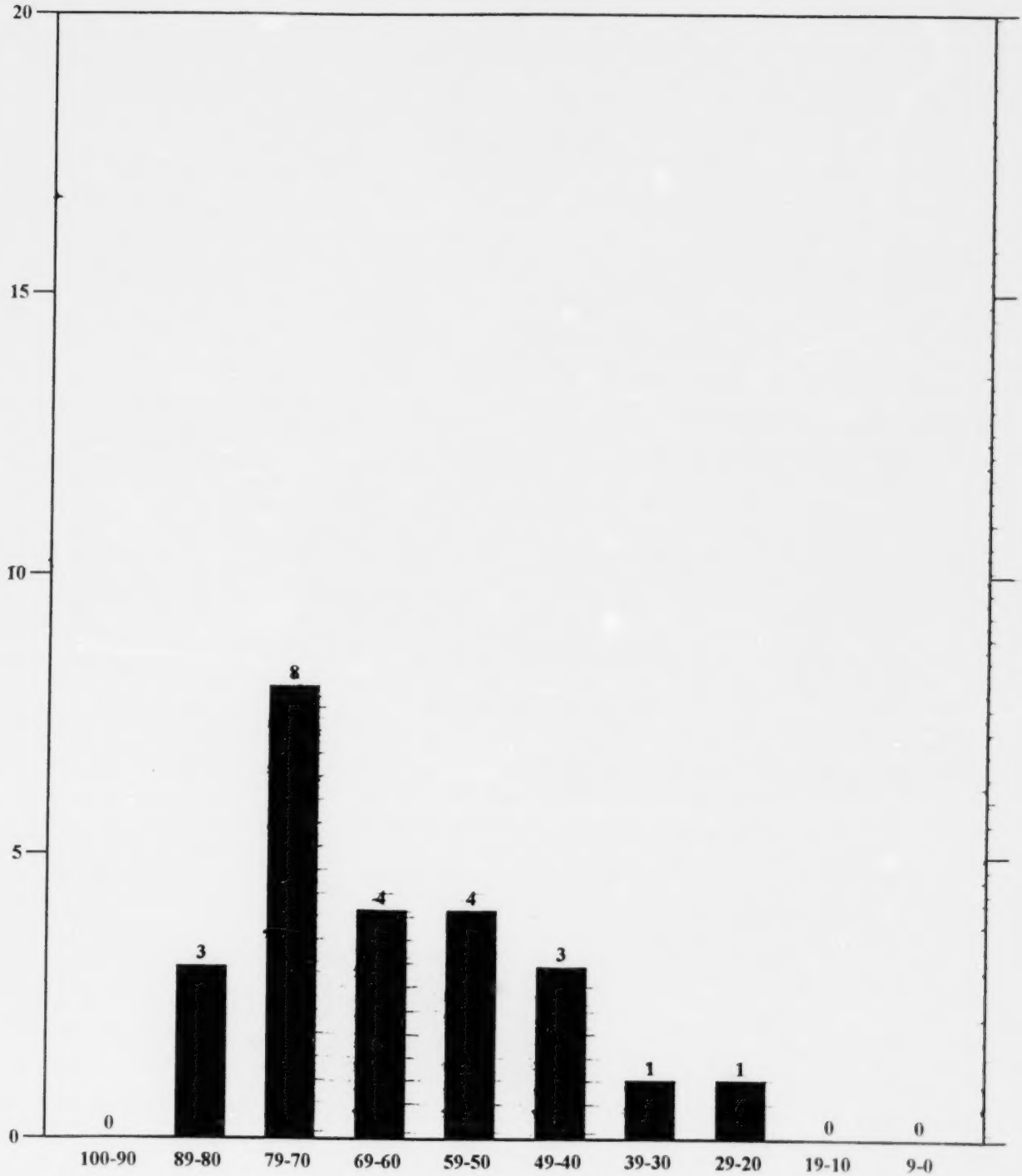
We expect all teachers to:

a) be certified and competent in their assigned content area
b) be adults who model what they expect of all students
c) establish set classroom rules
d) clearly define academic expectations
e) structure assessment techniques, which accommodate all learning styles
f) recognize in students areas of weakness and offer assistance
g) create a tolerant learning environment that encourages self-expression and risk taking
h) treat all students respectfully and fairly

We expect all parents to:

a) know, understand, and support the school's mission, philosophy, program, and rules
b) reinforce with their children the importance of getting a good education
c) have books, newspapers, and magazines available for their children to read; use libraries as resources; read aloud to their children
d) provide a quiet place and time to read, study, and complete homework and projects
e) take an active interest in their children's daily learning; everyday talk about what happened in school
f) expect their children to bring home all notifications promptly and follow-up with all communications from the school
g) establish consistent consequences if all student expectations are not met

CLASS BAR GRAPH
FOR
READING 401
~~VARYING~~



Number of Active Students: 24

Mean:	63.84	Mode:	85
Std Dev:	16.43	Median:	67

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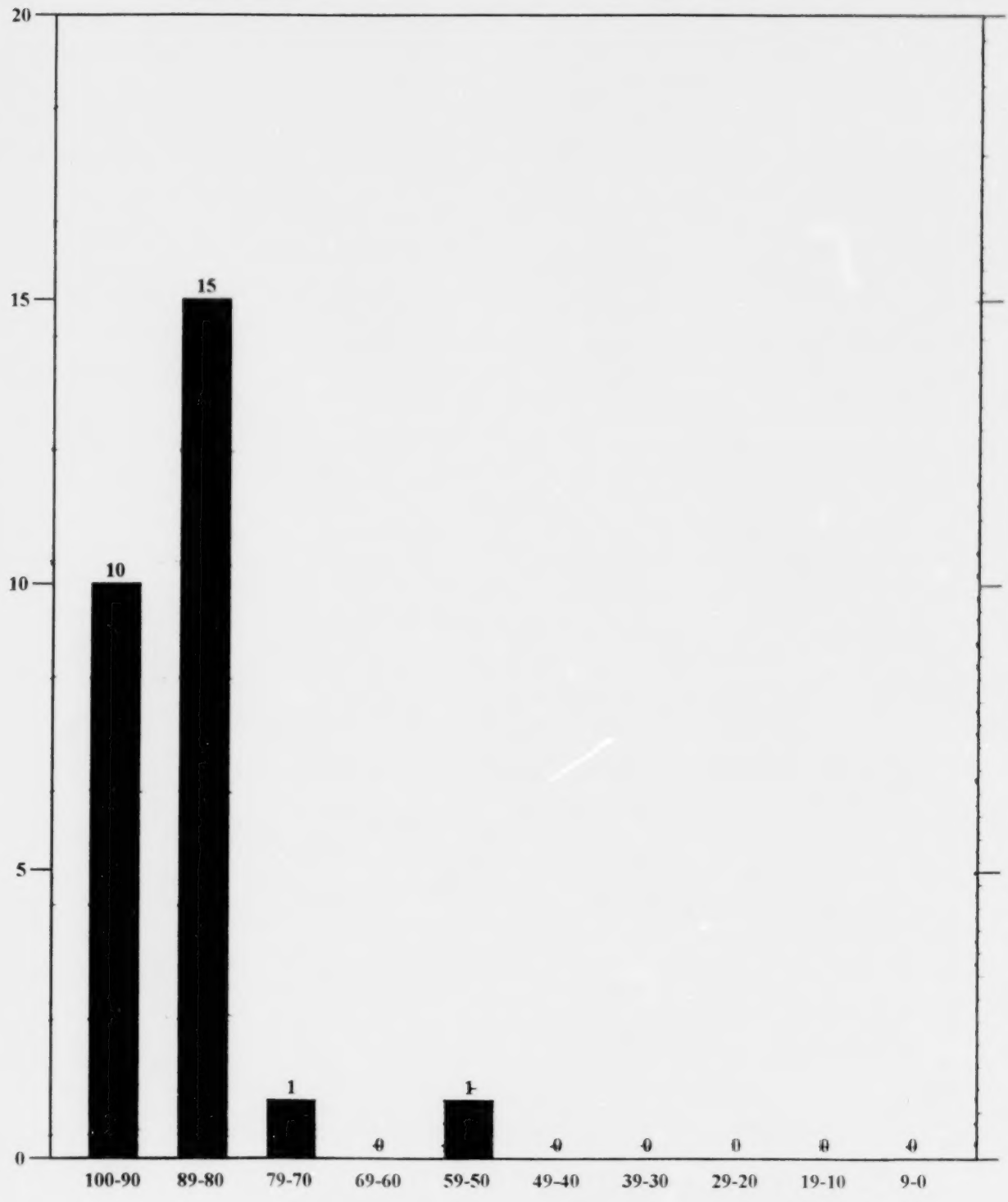
MULTIPLE CLASS BAR GRAPH
FOR

READING 401 **VARYING**



Number of Active Students: 27

Mean:	86.71	Mode:	87
Std Dev:	8.67	Median:	87

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